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The Humble Learner
Proverbs 30:1-33 Sermon

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A man walked into a bank with no mask or hat or sunglasses and robbed the bank at gunpoint in broad daylight. Then he did it again that same day at another bank, still with no mask or hat or sunglasses or disguise of any kind. The year was 1995 and there were security cameras. When the police came they examined the footage and showed a picture of the robber on the nightly news. They got tips right away, which lead them to the door of a one MacArthur Wheeler.

When the police arrived the robber was completely floored they had found him. He couldn't believe it. Why? Because as he put it, "I wore the juice." MacArthur had learned that you can use lemon juice as invisible ink. He figured that you could then rub lemon juice all over your face and you would appear invisible to security cameras. He'd even taken a picture of himself to test the idea, and apparently it worked, or at least he thought it had. Actually the juice stung his eyes so much it made it harder to rob the bank.

Now why share this story? Well MacArthur inspired two researchers named Dunning and Kruger to discover something now called the Dunning-Kruger effect. They found that those people who know little to nothing about a subject can be completely confident in their expertise of the subject. They also found that the more people knew about an actual subject the less confident they became, up to a certain point, and then they regain some of their confidence. This graph shows their theory. Less knowledge can lead to more confidence while more knowledge can lead to less confidence.

I'm sure we've all met people who think they know it all but actually know very little. We've probably met people who know a great deal but are incredibly humble. Would you rather be a know it all (who knows nothing) or a humble learner? In the book of Proverbs we encounter several types of people we can become:

- **The *wise* - Loves and obeys God** (Prov 9:10)

This is someone who is in relationship with God, who wants to know God and follow God's laws and decrees. This person is wise because they are humble learners. Proverbs calls them other names like, the "righteous, upright, diligent, [those who show] understanding, prudent). *They are the wise*. How about?

- **The *simple* - They don't care** (Prov 14:15)

This is someone who you and I might call lukewarm. They're apathetic. They're not that bad but neither are they good. *They don't really care one way or the other.* How about?

- **The *fool* - Actively oppose God** (Prov 1:7)

This is someone who has received God's message and rejects it. Not only do they decide not to live life God's way, but they intentionally choose to live life for themselves. They're fools. Proverbs calls them other names, like "wicked, lazy, [sluggard,] lacking sense." *But there are types even worse than a fool*.

- **The *scoffer* - Arrogant and unteachable** (Prov 15:12, 21:24)

This is someone who likes quarreling and is prideful. They like to argue and exert their dominance.

- ***Wise in his own eyes* - A know it all who knows nothing** (Prov 26:12)

Proverbs 26:12
Do you see a person wise in their own eyes?
There is more hope for a fool than for them. (NIV)

These are the people who Dunning and Kruger would say think they know a lot and yet know very little. They're the people with the lemon juice in their eyes. They're the opposite of humble learners.

But here's the Catch 22 (an impossible situation to get out of). The problem is that those people who think they know it all actually know very little and so don't study to learn more, because if they did, they would become a humble learner and soon discover they know very little.

So here's my question. What kind of person are you? Wise or simple? A fool or scoffer or wise in your own eyes? Or maybe a better question is not what kind of person are you but what kind of person do you want to become? I want to become a humble learner. I don't want to know it all. I want to become someone who grows even as they recognize how far they have to go. Let's turn to Proverbs 30 where we find what it means to be a humble learner through the example of a man named Agur. A humble learner has:

1) A low view of self (Prov 30:1-3)

Proverbs 30:1-3
1 The sayings of Agur son of Jakeh—an inspired utterance.

This man's utterance to Ithiel:

"I am weary, God,
but I can prevail.
2 Surely I am only a brute, not a man;
I do not have human understanding.
3 I have not learned wisdom,
nor have I attained to the knowledge of the Holy One. (NIV)

Agur is a model of true humility and wisdom. He's a nobody but he's also a somebody. He's a nobody because this is the only place in the Bible his name and his father's name are mentioned. Some think he was a foreigner but we don't know for sure. But even though he's a nobody he's also a somebody. He's a prophet. He speaks an oracle. He can speak things God has put in him to speak. But that doesn't inflate his ego. Rather, the more he knows God the more he realizes he doesn't know. He calls himself "a brute, not a man; I do not have human understanding. I have not learned wisdom..." *Agur has a low view of himself.*

I watched a TED Talk on the Dunning-Kruger effect and learned that people that have a moderate amount of knowledge on a topic tend to realize just how much they don't know. Actual experts in the field have a better self-perception but tend to think others know more than they actually do. *The more wise you become the more you realize your own lack of wisdom and have a low view of yourself.* But this shouldn't stop here because a humble learner has...

2) A high view of God (Prov 30:4)

Wisdom requires we grasp not only how small we are but how big God is. Agur is amazed by two things: God's creative power and God's ultimate plan.

Proverbs 30:4
Who has gone up to heaven and come down?
Whose hands have gathered up the wind?
Who has wrapped up the waters in a cloak?
Who has established all the ends of the earth?
What is his name, and what is the name of his son?
Surely you know! (NIV)

Agur is amazed by God's power over creation, to make the waters and sea like we find in Genesis 1 (Proverbs 8:22-31). But Agur is also amazed by God's plan. Remember Agur is a prophet? He speaks oracles. Here he prophesies that the "Holy One" of verse 3 has a "son" (v4b What is his name, and what is the name of his son?). God has a big plan. That plan has everything to do with God the Father's Son, Christ Jesus, rescuing us from our sins and restoring creation to how it's supposed to be. When we realize how great God is and how big his plan is it can't help but give us humility of heart, which leads to wisdom.

If you think about it, the gospel itself is pretty foolish (1 Corinthians 1:23). The gospel is that the wisest of all men (the Holy One's son) let himself be murdered for something he didn't do. That's incredibly foolish… unless by his sacrifice he paid the penalty for the sins of those who could not pay for themselves. Then it would be incredibly wise. Jesus is the wise son who died for anyone who is willing to repent of their sins and put their faith and trust in him. Is that you? Do you want to have a high view of God's plan? Then humble yourself, confess your sins, and believe in Jesus. Believe in the son, the same one Agur believed in.

It's not easy. Our pride says we don't need to deal with our sins—that there's nothing wrong with us. Verse 13 warns us of "haughty eyes." Haughty eyes come from a haughty heart that doesn't think it needs God. Haughty eyes and hearts lead to pain and hurt, to injustice and wrongdoing. *A humble learner has: 1) a low view of self; 2) a high view of God.*

I've been reading the book *The Death of a Guru* (affiliate link). It's the story of a Hindu boy named Rabi born in India who becomes a Brahmin priest and eventually becomes a Christian. As a teenager he understood Hinduism teaches everything is God. Now so as not to overestimate my knowledge of Hinduism I'm just telling you what I read in this book. He believed if everything was God, the cows, bugs, nature, people, it meant he also was God. So he sat in front of a mirror and worshiped himself.

As far as I know none of us practice Hinduism here but how many of us treat ourselves like God? How many of us practice some form of mirror-worship by constantly thinking about ourselves, doing what's best for ourselves, achieving our goals at the expense of others, not taking the time to listen to those with different opinions than ourselves? As God got ahold of Rabi's heart he began to realize he wasn't the big-G God, or even a little-g god. He wasn't divine. As he saw his own flaws he began to recognize that God must be something wholly different than himself. He writes:

> During my third year in high school I experienced an increasingly deep inner conflict. My awareness of God as the Creator, separate and distinct from the universe he had made, an awareness that had been part of me even as a small boy, contradicted the concept given to me by Hinduism that God was everything, that the Creator and the creation were one and the same. I felt torn between these two irreconcilable views. (pg. 97)

Rabi was developing true wisdom by discovering a right view of self and a high view of God. But he didn't know the God of the Bible yet. But he needed to. This leads me to point three. *A humble learner has:*

3) Trust in what God says (Prov 30:5-6)

Listen to how Agur describes God's word.

Proverbs 30:5-6
5 "Every word of God is flawless;
he is a shield to those who take refuge in him
6 Do not add to his words,
or he will rebuke you and prove you a liar. (NIV)

Agur trusts God by trusting the Hebrew Scriptures, what we call the Old Testament today. These are God's words and we can bet our life on them. It warns us not do add to God's word because it's perfect (Gal 1:8; Rev 22:18-19). If God speaks through his word, then his word is complete just as it is ("flawless"). If you want wisdom, trust what God says through the Bible and through the Holy Spirit.

When I was in high school I went to a Christian camp and I don't remember a lot of what the speaker said but I remember one of the stories he told. I'm going to do my best to retell it to you. The speaker told us about the time in his college years when he and his friends were driving on a hot summer day and they saw a bridge with a cool river below it. And of course they thought this would be the perfect place to jump into the water and go for a swim. They got up to the bridge and there was a sign that said, "Warning. No jumping off the bridge." They totally ignored it and began to get ready to jump in. Then a police officer pulled up, rolled down his window, and said, "We've already pulled several bodies out of the water this year." And then he drove away. Turns out there were power lines under the bridge. They didn't jump in!

We choose whether to trust words all the time. Words can save us, like a "Stop" sign, or "cook to 165 degrees" or "No jumping off the bridge." But the words that matter the most are God's words. If we trust God through his word, Jesus will save us. God's words hold eternal life for those who will believe. *A humble learner has: 1) a low view of self, 2) a high view of God, 3) trust in what God says*. And fourth…

4) A prayer for contentment (Prov 30:7-10)

Here we find the only direct prayer in the book of Proverbs as the author speaks to God.

Proverbs 30:7-10
7 "Two things I ask of you, Lord;
do not refuse me before I die:
8 Keep falsehood and lies far from me;
give me neither poverty nor riches,
but give me only my daily bread.
9 Otherwise, I may have too much and disown you
and say, 'Who is the Lord?'
Or I may become poor and steal,
and so dishonor the name of my God.

10 "Do not slander a servant to their master,
or they will curse you, and you will pay for it. (NIV)

The first thing he prays for is to keep falsehood and lies far from him. Why do we lie to get ahead or lie about others to make them look bad and ourselves good (v10)? Because we're not content. Something about our situation isn't what we want it to be so we lie to get what we want or lie to cover up a truth. You know what that really is? Idolatry. I want that thing more than I want God. If you want to be a humble learner, ask God to satisfy you so you don't want something more than him but want God himself.

The second thing Agur prays for is for God to give him just what he needs, "Don't give me more than I need because I don't want to feel like I don't need you. But also don't give me too little so that I steal and dishonor you." Do you ever think, "It would be really nice to have a little more money?" Would you want that money if you knew it might lead you away from God, from depending on him? Pray that God will only give you that raise, or even take away your money, if it would help you love him more. That's a hard prayer to pray. I don't like praying it.

Christianity.com tells the story of a cricket player in the late 1800s. The player, C.T. Studd, became a Christian but it wasn't till six-years later when he heard Dwight L. Moody preach that he gave his all to Christ. He became a missionary and worked with Hudson Taylor in China. He's famous for saying, "*Some wish to live within the sound of Church or Chapel bell; I want to run a Rescue Shop within a yard of hell*."

When he turned twenty-five years old in 1885, Studd inherited quite a bit of money, but he decided that instead of keeping it he would give it all away. He said, "If Jesus Christ be God and died for me, then no sacrifice can be too great for me to make for Him." His words echo Jesus words in Mark 8:35, "For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it." (NIV)

He gave money to Dwight L. Moody who used it to start Moody Bible Institute. He gave money to George Mueller who used some of it for his orphanage. He gave money to the Salvation Army. And he gave money to Hudson Taylor's China Inland Mission. He and his wife gave all their money away and became full-time missionaries dependent on God for everything. That doesn't seem very wise, does it?

It's not very wise if God isn't real. But if God is real and calls us to lose ourselves to find him, then it's incredibly wise. What does that look like for you? What do you need to give to him? Maybe it's your fortune, your time, or your career, or something else. Most of all he wants you, all of you! It might be painful and hard to give yourself to God, and it's not quick (it takes a lifetime), but it will be the wisest decision you ever make.

So what's the solution to the Dunning-Kruger effect? An Agur heart—to become a humble learner. Follow Agur's example. He models being a humble learner for us. We follow Agur as he follows the Son. Together we follow Christ who by his grace makes it possible for us to become humble learners. *A humble learner has: 1) a low view of self, 2) a high view of God, 3) trust in what God says, and 4) a prayer for contentment.*

Jonathan Romig preached an earlier edition of this sermon at Cornerstone Congregational Church in Westford, MA on August 31, 2019 when he served there as pastor. You can download a PDF at archive.org or read it on Substack. Jonathan attended Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary (GCTS) where he earned his Master of Divinity (M.Div) and Doctor of Ministry (D.Min).

Discussion Questions

Questions for small groups, Bible studies, or personal devotionals:

1. What is the Dunning-Kruger effect, and where do you see it at work in everyday life?
2. Proverbs describes five types of people: the wise, the simple, the fool, the scoffer, and the one wise in his own eyes. Which do you find most challenging to avoid becoming?
3. What does Agur's right view of himself tell us about what true wisdom looks like?
4. How does a high view of God, including God's plan through Jesus, guard us against pride?
5. Why is it significant that the only direct prayer in Proverbs asks for contentment rather than success or blessing?
6. Where in your own life are you tempted to trust yourself more than God's Word?
7. C.T. Studd gave away everything to follow Christ. What would it look like for you to hold your resources with an open hand before God?

Proverbs Sermon Series

Go through the Proverbs with Jonathan Romig in this sermon series: Everyday Wisdom

Resource Recommendations

Some of the links in this manuscript are affiliate links ("aff link"), which means we get a small percentage if you purchase the resource through the link. We recommend checking out your local library or thrift store.

Proverbs (Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms) (aff link) by Tremper Longman III

How To Read Proverbs (aff link) by Tremper Longman III

Death of a Guru (aff link) by Rabi R. Maharaj

Free Sermon Notes Worksheet: Download

Endnotes

"The Curious Case of MacArthur Wheeler." Steemit. Published 2018. Accessed August 29, 2019. https://steemit.com/steemstem/@rsc227/the-curious-case-of-mcarthur-wheeler.

See also Proverbs 3:7, 12:15, 16:2, 21:2, 26:5, 26:16, 28:11.

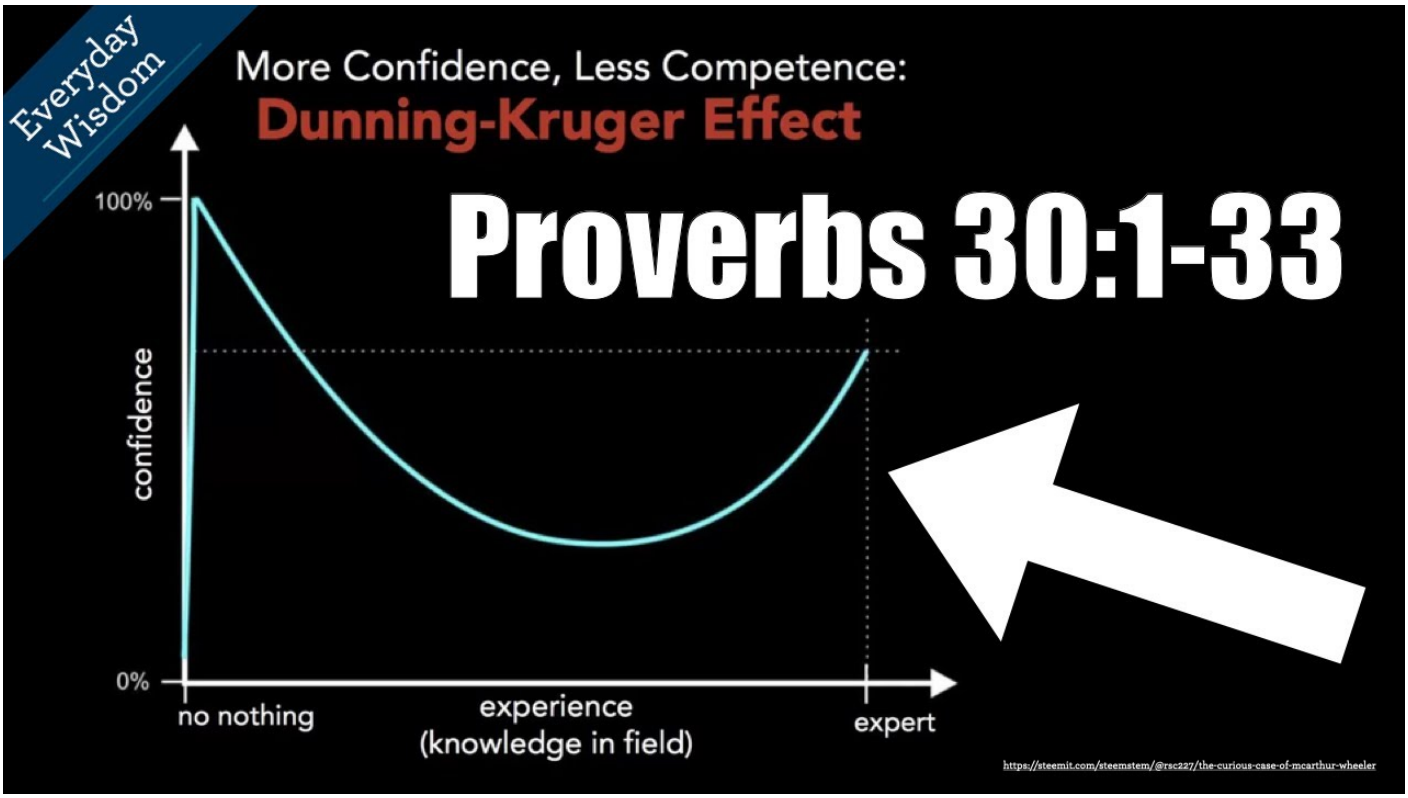
"Why incompetent people think they're actually amazing — David Dunning." YouTube. TED-Ed. Published 2018. Accessed August 30, 2019. https://youtu.be/pOLmD_WVY-E.

See ESV Study Bible introduction to the book of Proverbs, specifically "Character Types in Proverbs." Kindle location 161,185.

Death of a Guru: A Remarkable True Story of one Man's Search for Truth by Rabi R. Maharaj. Published June 1, 1984. Page 60.

C.T. Studd Gave Huge Inheritance Away. Christianity.com. Published May 2007. Accessed August 30, 2019. https://www.christianity.com/church/church-history/timeline/1801-1900/c-t-studd-gave-huge-inheritance-away-11630616.html.

Wikipedia contributors. (2026, May 19). Charles Studd. In Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia. Retrieved 12:19, June 6, 2026, from https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Charles_Studd&oldid=1355079920



Watch the sermon on YouTube.